

49: Ghosts of Reach

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Summary: More than a few Spartan IIs survived the Fall of Reach. T for violence.

1. Prologue

49 Prologue

All right. You all know that Mendez was training a "next generation" of Spartans: The SPARTAN " IIIIs. This is pretty much their story, or, rather, the story of one of them. But first, a drinky-poo! And some backgroundâ€|

Data

Bank/records/UNSC/ONI/

CLASSIFIED

encryptkey.UNEVENELEPHANT/randomseed

ACCESS

NavSpecWep/SPARTAN/III

ERROR/directory not found/reenter:

/directory not found/reenter:
repeat

/wwwaaaaarrrrrnnnniiiiinnnnngggg/sssyyyyssssttttteengagesearchcheemmmmmffff
feecriteriaUNSEALTHEHUSHEDCASKETeeddddbbbbbaaaacccckkkkk/endtask.

Results Found/key requested:

enter: John/117

ACCESS

Begin transmission

Upon the SPARTAN " II program's (tentative) completion in 2525 (their MJOLNIR suits didn't have shields yet), and along with their success so far, preparations (preparations A through G failed) were made for a new generation of Spartans: the SPARTAN " III project. But before training could begin, new specimens would need to be selected.

Dr. Halsey excused herself from this process the second time, and instead convinced Mendez and a few very select others to choose the next Spartans. She felt that, by not choosing which candidates would become Spartans, she wasn't at fault (at least, as much fault) for the danger that they would surely have to face. However, she still endeavored to give them a better chance than they had last time. Her first act was to acquire funding for new research into bio-enhancement.

End transmission.

2. Chapter 1

Section 1

Exposition

Chapter 1,

Regret" No, the Emotion

2100 Hours/ August 30, 2549 (Military Calendar)/

CASTLE Facility, planet Reach, Epsilon Eridani system.

As Dr. Halsey sat at her desk compiling a report about the new Spartans, she thought about all that had happened in the last few years with the SPARTAN " III program. Amazing advances had been made in bioengineering. Many in safety, but many in the improvement aspect as well. After the 30 SPARTAN " IIIs had been operated upon, fully 27 returned to training. Only one died, and two others were mentally disabled. A Covenant alloy that was "captured" and studied revealed a flexible yet extremely strong alloy that could be melded to living bone, which would grow with the bone, allowing improvement at an earlier age and a much safer procedure. Ocular surgeries now included the ability to see in infrared, as well as see with 20/. 03 vision. But the most dramatic (and dangerous) alteration was the neural augmentation.

Designed for intelligence and stealth more than for brute strength, the Mark III's neural augmentations were very important. Their upgraded cybernetics allowed them to interface directly with any computer system without the aid of an Artificial Intelligence (AI) construct. The Spartan IIs lacked this enhancement, but were capable of carrying an AI in their mind with the aid of the Mjolnir suit. The S-III modifications had their own drawbacks, however. For example, the Spartan " IIIs lacked some of the computational powers of a true "smart" AI, yet they were susceptible to the dangers an AI faces from feedback loops, enemy AIs, and system purges. Fortunately, the

Spartan - IIIs were capable of carrying an AI in their mind without the aid of a Mjolnir suit.

All AIs were modeled after the human mind, but _smart_ AIs were created by sending electrons down the neural pathways of a Human brain, thereby copying the _exact_ structure and enabling the AI to use the full potential of the Human brain. This process, however, destroyed the brain, so it was only used on dead specimens. Unfortunately, smart AIs had a lifespan of only about 7 years, after which the brain would grow exponentially and the AI would begin to think _too_ much, and die. One smart AI once described it as "Thinking so much that you forget to breathe." So-called "dumb" AIs, on the other hand, lacked creative ability. The function of each one was limited to the specific purpose for which it was designed. Consequently, _smart_ AIs far surpassed the others by virtue of their versatility. Hence, top-secret government programs usually employed smart AIs.

The Spartan " IIIs were also given a special memory cross-referencing system. By using a conscious mechanism to create the connections between neurons in the brain, they could voluntarily commit anything to a particular connection. They could also remember things in full video, audio, and tactile sensory knowledge. Rather than simply "knowing" that they saw or heard something, they could see and hear it again as if experiencing it for real. They could also set mental reminders: choose to remember something at a specified time, or under specific circumstances.

It was a good thing that they could be operated on at an earlier age than the SPARTAN " IIs. The IIIs were only 11-15 years old now, and they were needed immediately. Unfortunately, the neural upgrades were still prototypical, and two new Spartans were permanently disabled. Originally, the 3s were going to be suped-up versions of the 2s, mainly combat units, but eventually the Humans realized that their only hope for survival would be to outwit their enemy. The Spartan IIs would attempt to infiltrate the Covenant home world. In the meantime, the young S-IIIs had begun training for the clandestine ops that would be necessary to bring about negotiations with the Covenant.

Since they were to be super-spies, the mark IIIs needed to get rid of the bulky suit. The first thing was to create a Fusion Reactor and Shield Generator small enough to be relatively undetectable to the naked eye under the black suit of bullet-proof/energy dispersive armor. Of course, with such small components, these suits were obviously more of a last resort rather than a platinum credit card for destruction.

So here they were, toward the end of their training, another batch of Spartans ready for the killing fields. Dr. Halsey only hoped that they wouldn't be exposed to heavy fighting because of the stealth of their jobs. Nonetheless, she was having reservations about releasing all the information about their success, lest they be sent into action too soon.

3. Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Even more background!

0400 hours/ August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar)/

Epsilon Eridani system, planet Reach, training facility about 83 kilometers from Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) CASTLE facility

Ben woke up on time. He always woke up on time; his neural implants took care of that. But even if he hadn't set them to alert him at the correct time, he would have awoken anyway. He'd been getting up at 0400 hours for the past 7 years.

Suddenly, a flood of memories entered his mind. The first thing he remembered was that he had set his implant to remind him of some things. The second thing he remembered was that today wasn't the normal day of work and training; there was something special about today.

He remembered what was so special about today. Ten days ago, he was on a training mission with his teammates. They were "playing with" Tango Company. At least, that's how Mendez referred to it. As their head trainer, CPO Mendez made it his goal to push the Spartans to their breaking point. His missions always had a trick to them. This time, the "trick" was that Tango would be using live Covenant munitions.

Ben looked at the Spartans around him. He had only been able to select 14 Spartans for this mission, and he selected his best soldiers. Kenneth, Spartan III-02, with his good leadership skills, made him a natural choice for a second-in-command. Albert, Spartan III-54, the lean, quick-talking, and nearly invisible (when he wanted to be) scout. Robert, Spartan III-23, the steadfast soldier, never flinched. Wang-mu, Spartan III-77, the patient sniper. Rachael, Spartan III-42, the munitions expert. Joel, Spartan III-12, the laid back comic. Despite the vast difference in personalities, all of the Spartans worked together flawlessly.

Ben, and the rest of the Spartans he had chosen for this mission had been dropped off near a wooded area and each had been given a stun pistol, and Ben had been given an Assault Rifle loaded with stun rounds. A company of marines, Tango Company, who the Spartans had fought in many of their training missions, was guarding a bunker somewhere in the forest. Unfortunately, the Spartan "IIIs" had never trained in that area before, so they were unaccustomed to the terrain.

"From this point on, we don't use our names. Tango knows them, and they may be listening in on our radio contact," Ben said. His team radioed back with a simple sign: a blue light appeared at the top of Ben's helmet's display for each Spartan that acknowledged him.

"Spartan III-54, take III-39 and III-73 and do some reconnaissance. You will be Yellow Team leader. Don't report over the radio unless using a code. The rest of us will lay low until you give us a sign," Ben instructed. "Spartan III-42, see if you can't over-charge a few of these stun pistols." Ben handed Rachael his pistol.

After several moments, Yellow Team came back to where they had left

the rest of the Spartans.

"There's a Titanium-A structure about half a click into the forest. Tango has a few guards stationed around it, but it looks like most of them are inside or patrolling farther away," Albert, Spartan III-54, said.

"I have a plan. Spartans III-23, 35, 12, 77, 69, and 42 are with me in Blue Team. Spartan 54, you keep your team and keep watch on the bunker. Spartan III-57, 19, 70, and 21 will be Red Team under Spartan III-02. Yellow Team, you will take Red Team to the bunker. As soon as a patrol gets back and another one prepares to leave, I will take Blue Team and attack the bunker. Then I'll attempt to lure as many of Tango's troops away as I can. Then Red Team will storm the base while Yellow keeps watch. Rachael, have you finished with those weapon 'upgrades' yet?" Ben asked.

"Almost, hold on! There. These three stun pistols will put a soldier out of the fight for this entire mission in one shot. And the MA5B Assault Rifle fires about 20 percent faster."

"Good. I'll use one of the pistols, and Red Team will take the other two and the Assault Rifle. Let's get moving," Ben said.

Ben took Blue Team at a slower pace than Yellow and Red. When they arrived at the bunker, the three members of Yellow took places encircling the base, and Red Team went around to the side opposite where Blue team was readying their distraction. An hour passed. Ben noticed that he couldn't get a clear view of Tango's weapons. Odd. Just then, a patrol returned. Ben sent one click over the private channel to his teammates.

As soon as the opportunity was perfect, Blue began firing on the base. Ben hit one of the marines square in the chest with a stun round. The marine was knocked onto his back. Blue Team followed suit, showing an astounding degree of accuracy. As soon as the marines began to retaliate, Ben ordered Blue Team to retreat to give Red their chance. But as Ben fell back to the cover of the trees, he saw the marine he had shot before pick himself up off of the ground. Body armor. Damn. He should never have underestimated his opponent.

The alarm had been raised, and most of Tango was chasing after Blue Team. Kenneth, Spartan III-02, gave the signal for attack to the rest of Red Team. He and the rest of his team got to the edge of the trees, and slowly entered the 30-meter diameter clearing that contained the bunker. He thought that he would be able to get close before Tango's detection gear spotted them. He was wrong. Before Red Team even got within 10 meters of the bunker, 10 fully armored marines piled out, plasma rifles aimed directly at the Spartans. Kenneth knew that this mission would be difficult, but he had no idea that he would have to face Covenant tech.

Blue bolts of fire streaked from Tango's weapons, and Red Team's Spartans dove to either side. Kenneth's shields took several direct hits. Warning indicators blared. His shields would fail after one or two more hits. He took the Assault Rifle and fired a spray of stun round directly at the marines.

"Aim for the head!" Kenneth shouted over the comm.

The four other Spartans in Red Team fired. Six marines fell to the ground. Christian, Spartan III-21, and Melanie, Spartan III-70, fell to the ground, burnt from the plasma that broke through their shields and began to melt away their armor. Still Kenneth and the other Spartans, Ronald and Sandy, fired at Tango's troops. Eventually, they all fell. Ronald carried Christian and Melanie back to the cover of the forest, and Sandy and Kenneth continued into the base after affirming that the marines were out cold.

Trees burned and cracked as plasma heated the air around them. Ben had been separated from the rest of Blue Team. He dove for cover behind a tree, and found Elizabeth and Rachael behind the same tree.

"On my mark, we all fire at once-" Ben was interrupted by a large blob of plasma that made the tree he was behind shudder and list to one side as it burned. As Elizabeth and Rachael stood to get out of the way, a hail of fire rained upon them. As they were about to fall, Ben dove in front of them. A flash, then black.

Kenneth had managed to capture the Spartans objective: a fuel-rod cannon. It was a Covenant weapon capable of doing a large amount of damage, and similar to a rocket launcher. Now Red Team leader was on his way to assist Blue Team. He arrived to find six heavily armed marines mowing down trees with their plasma rifles. As Kenneth prepared to fire, three Spartans jumped from the smoldering remains of a tree. Spartan III-02 would have held his fire if he had known he had a chance of wounding his comrades, but it was too late. The spheroid of projectile energy leapt from the cannon, and exploded on impact with the ground beneath the feet of the marines of Tango Company.

When Ben awoke, he learned that his team had won the exercise. Red Team had fulfilled its mission, and, while several Spartans (including himself) had been injured, the mission was a resounding success.

For his bravery and pain, Ben had earned a Purple Heart. It had taken him only 4 days to become mobile again, and he had all but recovered by the day the ceremony was set to occur.

Ben got out of bed, dressed, and went to the workout room. After he finished his last session of micro-grav physical therapy, he showered and headed down to the vehicle bay. The medal ceremony was scheduled for 0445 hours, and he wasn't going to be late. He had wondered why it was being held at such an early hour, but he knew that some covert ops were in progress, and he guessed that the higher-ups were pressed for time.

Ben had been trained to drive just about any United Nations Space Command (UNSC) vehicle since he was 9, and the M12 Light Reconnaissance Vehicle, or "Warthog", as the marines called it, was the first thing he'd ever driven. It looked like a normal truck, except for the M41 Light Anti-Aircraft Gun (LAAG) mounted where the rear passenger seats would be. It seated three: driver, passenger, gunner. It was 0430; he could make the drive in about 10 minutes. He keyed open the bay doors, jumped into the Warthog, and sped off.

It was 0443 when Ben arrived at CASTLE. There, a Lieutenant Haverson greeted him and ushered him into the auditorium where Dr. Halsey was

waiting for him. He stepped up to the front of the podium dressed in his black formals.

Admiral Whitcomb said, "Good morning, son."

"Good morning, sir", Ben replied.

"Well, let's cut to the chase. I'm required to leave in fifteen minutes, and I'm sure that you have important things to do as well," said the Admiral, "I want to congratulate you for extreme bravery in the face of danger, so much so, that you suffered a wound in the process. For that act, you have been awarded the Purple Heart." Whitcomb attached the medal to Ben's uniform.

"Thank you, sir!" Ben replied.

"Well, I hate to cut this short, but I need to leave. Lieutenant Haverson will show you out."

Dr. Halsey watched Ben, Spartan 3-49, receive yet another award. He alone constituted more than 1/3 of his team's achievements. He wasn't the strongest or the fastest, but he was the smartest and the bravest, and that made him a natural leader. Dr. Halsey knew that "her" Spartans were also getting ready to depart on a mission that would mean the biggest victory that Humanity had ever gained against the Covenant if it succeeded. It would also mean the death of many of her Spartans, even if they didn't fail.

Haverson walked to the front entrance with Ben. He knew that the Spartan III couldn't be older than 15, but this "kid" looked like he was at least 21. Just then, an alarm interrupted his thoughts.

"Warning. Enemy contacts reported in-system. All non-essential personnel are ordered to prepare to evacuate," the message repeated over the PA system. Red warning lights flooded the hallway.

Haverson knew what he had to do. He was about to secretly board the Pillar of Autumn (a UNSC ship containing Spartan IIs that were on a secret mission), so the evacuation was a perfect excuse to slip by security personnel who weren't cleared to know his top-secret intel mission.

Ben knew that this was it. He hadn't been fed propaganda like the rest of the public, and he knew that the planet was going to be destroyed. Only with extremely overwhelming force had Human ships ever defeated the Covenant, and he knew that the Covenant would only attack Reach with a large enough fleet to finish the job.

He ran to the CASTLE hangar. He knew how to fly a "Pelican" dropship (both named for its purpose: flying large amounts of troops into dangerous situations, and its appearance: short, stubby wings, and an angular cockpit that looked like a bird's face), and he was going to need one to rescue the rest of his Spartans. He got to the hangar, made sure there were plenty of other Pelicans for those who might need a ride out. 38. 37 should be enough.

He got in the Pelican, started her up, remote-keyed the hangar doors, and flew out of the aircraft bay at top speed.

4. Chapter 3

Chapter 3

DÃ©jÃ -Vous

0503 hours/August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar)/

Commandeered Pelican dropship, 13 kilometers from ONI training facility, planet Reach, Epsilon Eridani system

Ben set the Pelican to autopilot, and went to work in the back making room, storing supplies, and compiling a mental list of necessary supplies. He found 25 UNSC military-grade ration packets in the central room between the cockpit and the troop bay, and 2 MA5B assault rifles, 3 M6D pistols, and one of the new BR 55 battle rifles in storage. The rations were enough. He would need to grab more ammunition and weapons.

He finished taking inventory, and took his place in the pilot's seat of the dropship. It was 0513, and he was only 1½ kilometer from initiating his plan.

Kenneth heard the familiar whine of a Pelican. He instinctively looked in the direction of the sound. It was about 2 kilometers away. There had been an emergency broadcast that there were enemy contacts in-system, and he guessed Mendez was coming to brief them. All of the Spartan IIIs had immediately donned full battle armor, and had weapons and supplies at the ready.

Ben saw the small figures on the ground gradually grow into Human shapes as he approached. He knew that the UNSC had broadcasted an alert over the local comm. system. He also knew that his team would be ready for orders. He didn't even bother to set down in the hangar bay; he put down landing gear and skidded to a halt right in front of his anxious team.

He walked out and looked at a group of expectant, surprised faces. Ben walked over to Kenneth.

"Did everyone hear the alert?"

"Yes, and we've prepared," replied Kenneth with the hint of a grin crossing his face. He presented Ben's Mjolnir stealth suit, as well as quite a few grenades and MA5B assault rifles.

"Alright, we need to find CPO Mendez," Ben began, "do you have any idea where he is?"

"No. In fact, we all thought you might be him coming to brief us."

"Ok, then I want Rachael to try to contact him by radio. Albert, take Yellow Team and find another Pelican. Kenneth, take Red and Green Team, and load up the dropships. I'll take Blue Team and search the premises. Radio if something happens." Ben quickly changed into his Mjolnir stealth suit. He activated the open radio link between his teammates that was standard procedure for ops behind allied lines.

"Is everyone set?" he asked. 26 blue acknowledgement lights winked on. Kenneth could handle things here, and Ben needed to retrieve something before they left. Ben decided to split up blue team. It would be a faster search that way.

"Robert, take Joseph and recon the east wing. Wang-mu, take the west and north wings. I'll handle the south wing. Joel and Elizabeth, take the basement and quarters respectively. I'll cover my own room. I want you to look for any supplies, weapons, people or info you think we might need. I want to see everyone back at the Pelicans in 30 minutes. If anything goes wrong, meet back at the Birds earlier. I don't want to make contact with each other over the radio unless it's necessary. Let's move!"

It took Ben 10 minutes to reach his quarters. He took his upgraded M6D pistol and put it in his belt. Long ago he had realized that a stealthy weapon was the best weapon. He had upgraded the pistol to include a silencer, larger clip, and a 5x magnification. He grabbed some detection gear, and headed to the south wing.

When he got there, he had only one real goal. DÃ©jÃ , the only thing the Spartans ever had to a "personal" A.I. construct, should still have been in the computer systems at the facility, and he had to get her off of planet Reach. He walked into the main core.

"DÃ©jÃ ? Are you there?" he called. For several seconds, there was no response. Then the main holo-tube in front of him flickered to life.

"Greetings, Spartan 3-49. How may I assist you?" said the image of a Greek goddess; Athena, the image that Deja had chosen as her avatar at her initialization.

"DÃ©jÃ , quickly, I have to get you out of here." A several second pause went by.

"DÃ©jÃ , please respond."

"Processing large amounts of data. Speech algorithms no longer take priorityâ€¦ I'mâ€¦ sorryâ€¦ Back-up subroutines activated. How may I be of service?"

"DÃ©jÃ , I know you can hear me. You know this planet is headed for destruction. I'm going to get my Spartans out of here, one way or another, and I need your help. I need to download you into my neural lace."

"I'm sorry, but due to UNSC protocol 7352-37-b, no personnel are to evacuate a colony world without explicit instructions to do so. Iâ€¦ cannotâ€¦ violateâ€¦ programming."

"So you would rather watch the Covenant glass this planet from the ground? I'm sorry DÃ©jÃ , but I'm going to have to kidnap you." He found an interface portal for other A.I.s, and jacked himself in to the network. With a sudden flash of blue light, he was aware of himself in a different way. He couldn't "move" his arms and legs, but he could move, in a way, by thinking. He did a quick scan of the network. There. DÃ©jÃ was being used as a hub for ship movement. She was coordinating the ships _Mona_ _Lisa_, _Apache_, and _Delta_

Flier.

He did a quick scan of those ships and found that the _Mona_ _Lisa_ had lost all slip-space capabilities, and that the other two ships had some form of damage to both their translight and sublight engines. Those ships could be handled by their ship-borne AIs. He had to find a way to get through to Dã©jã . So he contacted the only smart AI that he knew could get the job done: Cortana.

Ben knew that Cortana was due to be transferred out-system, and he figured that, because of the Covenant attack, her ship would still be near Reach. He sent out a signal to any smart A.I.s still in the vicinity of Epsilon Eridani. One, then two, then three full processor cycles passed.

Finally he got a response: "This is Cortana. What do you want?" She asked impatiently.

"I need you toâ€| 'free' Dã©jã ." He sent her the data pertaining to Dã©jã ,

"She's performing useless tasks, and I need her help."

"I haven't received any orders to allow anyone to evac. I'm sorry."

"You know what Spartan â€" 117 would wantâ€|" The Spartan IIIs had been briefed on all of the original Spartan's exploits. Ben had done a little "digging", and knew that John was particularly fond of Dã©jã .

"You know I hate you." She said sarcastically.

"Just like everyone else," he played along, "Now, will you help me? I don't have nearly the power to do it myself."

"Yes. But this is a big favor." She knew full well that he would never be able to return it.

In seconds, Dã©jã was no longer slaved to the ship-routing sub-routines.

"Thank you, Cortana."

"You're welcome, Ben."

He didn't waste any time. He knew he wasn't going to be able to convince Dã©jã , so he had to physically yank her from the main cpu core.

5. Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Dã©jã -Vous All Over Again

0540 hours/ August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar)/

UNSC training facility, planet Reach, Epsilon Eridani system

Ben had 5 minutes to get back to the Pelican. He thought about telling his team he was going to be late, but he didn't want to risk broadcasting his plan to all the UNSC forces.

When he arrived at the dropship, he was 1 minute and 30 seconds behind schedule.

Kenneth greeted him: "We were about to send someone to look for you. I'm glad you decided to show up."

"Sorry. We need to move." He responded.

"No arguments here."

"Rachael, any luck contacting Mendez?" Ben asked.

"No. Plenty of interference, backwash, and small clips of troop deployments, but no Mendez." She replied.

"Wonderful. Well, if we can't get in touch with him, we'll have to leave without him." Ben said.

"Leave?" Responded a quizzical group of Spartan 3s.

"Yes. We're not going to fight plasma rounds bombarding us from space. If the battle is lost, and we have no combat opportunity, then we leave."

"How do we get off Reach?" asked Wang-mu.

"Leave that to me. For now, just be ready."

The next few minutes went by in silence. Ben and his team of Spartans monitored the battle in space. It wasn't going well. Suddenly, radio traffic increased by seven-fold. Broken reports of a carrier ship. Something about troop deployments. Then warnings to an orbital Magnetic Accelerator Cannon's planet-based generator. A MAC gun, or "The Big Stick" as the marines called it, used powerful magnets to accelerate projectiles weighing 600 tons in the case of ships, or 5000 tons in the case of Super MAC platforms, to 40 of the speed of light. These projectiles were generally made of depleted uranium, Titanium and/or tungsten.

But nothing was directed to the Spartan IIIs. Apparently, they were so well camouflaged by ONI that not even their superiors knew about them. But that didn't stop Spartan 3-49. A full hour had passed since the Spartans had started listening to the transmissions. Then they received a fully intelligible transmission: A distress call from none other than Admiral Whitcomb. A group of Spartan IIs had been sent to his aid, but Ben knew they needed as much back up as possible. Besides, it was a good excuse to fight along-side his role models.

"Alright Spartans, let's move. Reach's commanding officer needs help, and we're going to provide some of that help," Ben said authoritatively.

Calls of: "Finally!" and "Good, some action!" Echoed throughout the group.

They filed into the Pelicans. Soon both Pelicans were flying side by side to the Admiral's last broadcasted location. On the way Ben had time to speak with DÃ©jÃ . He had de-initialized her, and was storing her in his neural implants. He knew he'd need her, so he rebooted her.

DÃ©jÃ felt herself being pulled through layers of code. She felt like she'd just run into a feedback-loop. She remembered exerting herself to her maximum extent to coordinate the movements of two frigates and a destroyer. Then she was being torn between a conversation with one of her students and the task at hand. Suddenly, her orders were null, and she lost all contact with the system.

Now DÃ©jÃ was gradually becoming aware of herself again. She was being decompressed and loaded onto a neural network? She knew it had to be one of the new Spartans. The technology was only prototypical, but theoretically possible. She had never used wetware before, but since all AIs ran off of a network similar to the Human brain, she knew it couldn't be too different.

"DÃ©jÃ , are you running correctly? Run a full system diagnostic. I'm sorry I had to pull you from the central cpu without properly disengaging you, but time was of the essence. Have you finished the diagnostic yet?" All of Ben's thoughts came out at once.

"Yes," said DÃ©jÃ calmly, "I have finished. I'm fine. Except for a few small and correctable errors, my deactivation was not damaging."

"Thank God. We're going on " "

"We?"

"Yes," Ben began, "I have assumed temporary and complete control of the Spartan IIIs. Admiral Whitcomb is now the ranking official on planet Reach, and we're on our way to escort him to a safer area. I'm going to need your help."

6. Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Oooh, Fight Sequences!

0711 hours/ August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar)/

"Commandeered" Pelicans, planet Reach, Epsilon Eridani system

Ben extended the landing gear, and then set down his Pelican.

"Go go go!" Ben shouted to his team as he opened the door to the troop bay.

The Spartans jumped out while both dropships were still 3 ½ meters from the ground.

They had seen enemy contacts from the air, and put down 2 kilometers

from the firefights. They ran, MA5B assault rifles in hand, toward their goal. Because of their augmentation and Mjolnir armor, they were able to run at speeds upwards of 56 per kilometers an hour. Needless to say, they were there in minutes.

When they came to the top of a hill overlooking the battle in the slightly wooded valley below, Ben used an ocular enhancement device to view the skirmish. He met with the sight of several Spartans and one officer, presumably Admiral Whitcomb, being forced back to the cover of some large rocks in one end of the valley by a large force of the short, squatty, and very alien-looking, Grunts. The Grunts were about 5' tall, and relatively weak. They tended to stick together in packs and travel with stronger allies. Their tactic was to use an overwhelming group strategy. Grunt's armor housed a life support mechanism. This fit with intel and research that they were originally from a planet with regular temperatures of â€"20 degrees Celsius and an atmosphere made up of mostly methane and nitrogen. It was discerned from a few captured specimens that their armor contained super-cooled methane. In front of the Grunts, in a shield wall formation, was a group of the ferocious, man-sized, Jackals. With superior senses of sight, smell, and hearing, Jackals served as scouts and assassins for the Covenant forces. They generally carried a dome-shaped energy shield in front of them to make up for their physical weakness. They had an appearance that resembled a mix of dog and bird, and usually wore metal body armor. Three blue-armored, Humanoid, 8' 6" Elites were in the center of danger, in front of the rest of the alien forces, their over-inflated sense of honor clouding their tactical judgment. In the back, a red-armored Elite presumably led the attack force. The Elites came in many varieties, some commanded and fought on-board the Covenant ships, some acted as spies, and others acted as soldiers. But Elites were usually field commanders for the Covenant. They were incredibly strong, and their resilience was augmented by full-body energy shielding that recharged when depleted.

Ben assessed the situation. The Human forces were taking cover behind a cluster of boulders. He decided not to run directly into battle.

Ben turned to Wang-mu, "I need you to take out that Elite."

He tagged it on his Heads Up Display (HUD), then transferred what he was seeing to the interface of her S2 AM sniper rifle. Wang-mu was the best sniper in their group. She had a peaceful, graceful personality. She always resolved conflicts; she was a well of tranquility for the Spartans. She also had the steadiest trigger finger among the Spartans.

Wang-mu replaced the barrel on her rifle, switched the long-range device for a slightly less accurate, but silenced, barrel. The weapon chirped once, the Elite's shields went down. The rifle chirped again, and the veteran Elite fell to the ground in a puddle of alien blood.

Ben and his team charged the surprised Covenant with their MA5Bs. When he got in range, he slowed to steady his aim, and used his M6D pistol to take out some of the Jackals that hadn't yet realized what was happening. He sent his first round through the column along the Jackal's back, which passed for a spine. As the two Jackals next to it whirled around, he put a metal slug in the side of one of them. It

staggered to the left, and Ben finished it with a round that splintered the bone in its skull.

The other one had completely turned, and was about to fire as 2 bullets ricocheted off of its shield, and one blasted the plasma pistol (a weapon that shot weak bursts of green plasma, but could be overcharged for a devastating effect) out of its hand. It raised its shield slightly as it reeled back in pain. He had a clear shot at its left leg. He fired at its knee, shattering bone, bringing it to its stomach. He fired into its head, killing it.

When he looked back up to the battle, he saw three Mark " II Spartans take down one of the blue-armored Elites. One was already dead, Ben assumed either his Spartans or the Mark " IIs had taken it down while he was dealing with the Jackals. That left one more. Ben leapt forward, and open-palmed a Grunt, crushing its chest cavity. The Elite noticed Ben charging, and sent a spray of plasma in Spartan 3-49's direction. Ben picked up the shield of a fallen Jackal, and continued towards the Elite. It ducked behind a nearby tree. "Perfect," Ben thought.

Noki 'Demamee had landed on the defiled human planet one-sixteenth period earlier. He was part of a special unit whose purpose was to strike with lightning speed and devastation, then be extracted without the enemy being able to respond. They had been dropped by a new, more powerful Phantom dropship. It was an easy mission. All they had to do was intercept one of the pitiful enemy commanders, and then destroy them and their guards. Unfortunately for the unit Noki was assigned to, those "guards" just so happened to be Demons.

Noki had never seen such powerful resistance before. Soon, the disgusting humans had killed several Elites, and many of the Grunts and Jackals had died. However, Noki's own hands had killed one of the Demons: A sure promotion. The battle seemed to be going in their favor, until there was a loud crack, and Mena 'Shakalee (Noki's field commander) fell to the ground. After that, everything had been a blur. Enemy reinforcements had broken the Jackals in their formation, and the Grunts were scattering in fear. Pathetic, weak, useless heretics! If any of them survived the battle, he would personally snap every last one of the Grunt's necks. These enemy reinforcements seemed to be a different type of Demon. They moved quickly, like a shadow on the ground. And they seemed only to touch the Covenant forces, and they would fall to the ground.

Soon, two more of his Elite comrades had been killed. He saw one of silent, black shadows racing for him. He fired, but before his shots could reach their target, the shadow had picked up a Jackal's shield. Before the blur got to him, Noki retreated behind a tree. He realized his mistake even before he saw the blue aura radiating from the other side of his cover.

Ben had picked up a dropped plasma grenade. Once armed, they would radiate a blue fiery glow, and they could tell the difference between living tissue and inanimate object, and would bond to an enemy on contact. Once a plasma grenade came to a rest, or was stuck to a target, a 3-second timer was started, and nothing could prevent what came next. Ben felt satisfaction when he saw the fiery blast. The Elite behind the tree growled in its deep, guttural language, and the tree in front of it splintered into a thousand pieces.

Without any Elites to provide leadership, the rest of the Covenant soldiers ran under a spray of bullets. Clean up was easy, and soon the Human forces had space to breathe. Ben removed his helmet.

"Spartan 3-49, is that you?" asked Admiral Whitcomb.

"Sir, yes sir. How may I be of service?"

"No one ordered you to help us. I think saving our lives counts as service enough.

Where is your CO?" Whitcomb drawled in his thick Texan accent.

"We haven't been able to establish contact. We heard your call for assistance over the comm., decided to do something other than sit around and wait for someone to remember us."

"Well, it's a good thing you did. You can come with us to CASTLE facility. That'll be the only safe place on Reach until we drive back those Covenant bastards."

Two of the mark " II Spartans picked up a large Titanium"A case. Ben wondered what was inside, but he kept his mouth shut. If he was supposed to know, he would.

"We have two Pelicans about one click away. We can use them to get to CASTLE."

"Sounds good," replied Whitcomb.

17 minutes later, the Spartan " IIIs (who were just barely small enough to cram into the troop bays in the Pelicans) and the Spartan " IIs were crowded into the back and the center room of the struggling Birds. Ben was piloting the Pelican holding Whitcomb and the S " IIs, as well as Wang-mu, Rachael and Kenneth and 8 other Spartan " IIIs. Joel, one of the best pilots among the Mark " IIIs, piloted the other ship that carried 15 other Spartan " IIIs. Joel's Pelican was just aft and below Ben's as they flew to CASTLE.

The Admiral's team had managed to attach the mysterious case to the vehicle dock on the bottom of Ben's Pelican. This made for a very bumpy ride. Ben wanted to make sure they wouldn't run into any surprises.

"D@j ?" he thought.

"Yes?" Ben heard inside his head.

"Can you link to the satellite surveillance network and tell me if we're headed for any enemy atmospherical vehicles?" he asked

"Yes. But all I can give you is some fuzzy pictures with a delay of about 20 seconds."

"That's better than nothing. Thank you, D@j ."

Ben saw a map of the surrounding area appear on his HUD. It wasn't much, but he got a view of deployments of some Covenant troops. For a

few moments, they rode in silence. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a small blur on his surveillance map. A few seconds passed, and the map was updated. The Blur was headed right for them. And at the delay, they should be very close.

"I've detected evidence of ships moving in our direction. At their speed, they look like Banshees. Everyone, brace yourselves. If they attack us, we're going to be passing through some serious turbulence," Ben warned over the dropship's intercom. He also alerted Joel.

Banshees were the Covenant's standard ground assault aircraft. They were very fast, extremely maneuverable, and capable of hovering in place. They had two weapons pods mounted to either side of the fuselage. Both of those pods contained a light plasma-cannon and a fuel-rod cannon. Though small arms fire could disrupt or disable the pilot, only heavy weapons could damage or destroy the vehicle.

"Admiral Whitcomb, do you have any preference if I have to set this ship down?" he asked. Before the Admiral could respond, every warning in the cockpit went off. He checked the motion radar. At least three Banshees had spotted them, and were accelerating into position. Ben shut off the warning sirens, and gunned the dropship's powerful engines. Joel's did the same. Ben wanted to get as close to CASTLE as possible.

The Banshees came into the short-range radar. Four. Ben certainly couldn't out-maneuver them, and a two Pelicans couldn't out-gun them, either. Blue plasma streaked by the cockpit windows. Alarms went off. The right wing was hit. It was bad. Ben attempted evasive maneuvers, but he couldn't keep control of the aircraft. Green rounds from a fuel-rod cannon flew by the cockpit. That was the good news. An explosion rocked the Pelican. That was the bad news.

"I've detected evidence of ships moving in our direction. At their speed, they look like Banshees. Everyone, brace yourselves. If they attack us, we're going to be passing through some serious turbulence," Ben's voice came over the comm. system.

"Everyone hear that?" Joel asked the Spartans in his Pelican.

15 acknowledgement lights blinked in Joel's HUD. He checked his dropship's altimeter and velocity against how much fuel was left. It'd be enough to get to CASTLE, but not if this Pelican was damaged. He increased the speed and tried to gain a bit more altitude before the Banshees attacked.

A few seconds later, four Banshees showed up on the radar. "Hang tight! I'm gonna try to shake 'em!" Joel called to his passengers.

The Banshees sent fire streaking toward both Banshees. Then Joel realized that his first duty was to protect Whitcomb, and that duty superseded all other directives. He set the Pelican to fire at one of the Banshees, and positioned his ship between the Covenant vehicles and the Pelican in front of his. Goodbye, thought Joel, as bolts of plasma intended for the Admiral and Ben struck the other Pelican instead. One of the four Banshees had been shot down by the time Joel's Pelican exploded.

7. Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Uh-Ohâ€¦|

0739 hours/ August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar)/

"Commandeered" Pelican, planet Reach, Epsilon Eridani system

Ben flipped to the feed from the rear camera. Nothing happened. He realized that this was because there wasn't any rear camera left. He checked the Pelican's instruments. All of the engines were inoperable except for the stabilizers. He tried to open a comm. link to the other Pelican, but all he got was static. He then checked the radar: bits of debris were falling beneath him. Ben activated the intercom.

"Is everyone ok back there?" he asked.

"Negative. Microfractures are spreading along the rear chamber. Atmosphere is leaking, and a quarter-meter wide piece of hull plating melted away from the blast. We've patched it up, but Rachael took severe burns." Kenneth responded.

The situation looked bleak. Ben put the dropship's LAAG on auto-target. He set the missile pods to target heat sources. Without engines, he couldn't steer the drop-ship, so there was no use staying in the cockpit. He donned his black, angular helmet, and opened the door to the center room of the Pelican. A hiss of air rushed past him. The door to the troop bay from the center room had been blown apart by the rapid decompression that followed the explosion. At the altitude Ben was flying â€" no, falling â€", pressure leaks could balloon and tear holes in the side of his speeding ship.

The back of the craft was cramped. Ben was about to say something, when another explosion tore the left wing completely off. It sent the Pelican spinning and lurching, as well as its cargo and passengers. Ben realized the only option. They were on a sinking ship, and all they could do was swim.

Ben sprang into action.

"Alright," Ben said, bracing himself on the wall, "we've got to do something. At our trajectory, those Banshees will have a tough time hitting us. But one or two more hits and we're toast. And if we aren't melted by plasma, the ground option isn't looking too good either. Right now, there is a forest directly below us. If we jump at a low enough altitude, our biometrics and lightweight armor should protect us from the fall. Unfortunately, the Admiral and his team have a significantly lower chance. But I have an idea."

"What exactly are you thinking, son?" Whitcomb asked.

"Before I jump, I'll crawl along the outside of the Pelican, and try to reposition the velocity stabilizers. With the correct sequence of bursts, you might be able to pull out of this spin. If you drain the fuel tanks before impact, you might be able to make it."

"I suppose we're getting the better end of the deal, all things considered," the Admiral said, "But what about the Banshees?"

Ben pulled 5 plasma grenades from a compartment in the floor. "Pray my aim stays on."

Admiral Whitcomb spoke to the Spartan " IIs on a private frequency through his helmet. Seconds later, he spoke to everyone.

"All right, we'll do it, but only because I haven't heard a better idea. If we all die, I'm going to make sure you live to regret it," the Texan said with a wry grin on his face.

"Ok, Spartans, let's move. Admiral Whitcomb, I'm going to open the airlock, so you need to be at the helm to re-close it. Then, I'll transmit the new positions of the stabilizers and a subroutine for the 'descent' burns."

The Admiral nodded and went into the pilot's compartment with the rest of the mark " IIs.

Ben signaled to the cockpit when he was ready. He had the most difficult task: He had to crawl along the outside of the dropship and reposition and repair (if possible) the 8 velocity stabilizers. There were 4 underneath the Pelican, 1 on each side, and 2 on the top.

Ben's team would jump once the back hatch opened. Then, when he was ready, he would jump too. Then, once everyone's landing positions had been figured out, they would rendezvous and try to get off of Reach. That was the part of the plan he forgot to mention to Admiral Whitcomb.

The hatch cracked. Air whipped past the Spartan " IIIs. Ben watched his team fall into small black dots toward the ground below. He knew he'd have to work fast. Ben estimated that he had about a minute before he'd have to jump. The last of the excess air pressure evacuated the back compartment. The wind tore at his armor. He magnetized the soles of his suit's feet. He called a link to Dã@jã through his neural lace. Since Dã@jã wasn't a smart AI, like Cortana, she couldn't fully interface with his mind; she was merely a program running in his implant.

"Dã@jã , I need you to link with the dropship's instruments and determine its spin and rate of descent. Then I need you to tell me how to orient the stabilizing thrusters in order for a descent burn." Ben felt the processing power of his implant being taxed as she did the physics calculations and simulated different possibilities.

"I'm going to need a few seconds," Dã@jã said.

Ben crawled out onto the hull of the Pelican. The spinning and disorientation almost made him vomit. He closed his eyes and used his implant to create a false sense of equilibrium. He dimmed his helmet's view plate so that he wouldn't see the ground rushing beneath him. His conversation with Dã@jã had taken him only a fraction of a second: as fast as he could think it. However, it took him 15 seconds to make it to the underneath of the dropship, where the first 4 thrusters were located.

At first Ben had thought the Banshees had broken pursuit, assuming their job was done once the Human ships had been destroyed or disabled. That was until his thoughts were interrupted by blue fire streaking through the air next to him. Two bolts hit his shields. The integrity meter went down to two-thirds its fully charged amount. There was only one Banshee following the Pelican, the others must have had more important work. This one must have been there to finish the job. But Ben had a surprise for the driver of the deep purple aircraft chasing him.

Ben removed the 5 plasma grenades from his supply belt. He primed them all, waited two seconds, and then released them towards the Banshee in a spray formation. It must have seen the blue shine of the explosive devices before Ben threw them, because it did a barrel roll to avoid them. 3 went wide, but one attached itself to the left engine fuselage, and one exploded in the air directly beneath the Banshee. The plasma grenade that was attached to the Banshee exploded. At first, Ben thought it hadn't affected the Covenant vehicle. But when the blue cloud of fire vanished, he saw that one of the bars that connected the left engine to the main craft was broken, shorting out the entire left manifold. The pilot's screams couldn't be heard as the aircraft plunged out of view.

"Alright, Dã©jã , I need that positional information _now_."

"I believe this is the best layout," her voice echoed through his mind. An overlay of how the stabilizers should be positioned appeared on his HUD.

As Ben worked, he noticed that the metal case attached to the bottom of the Pelican was still intact. He did a quick sensor scan: he got readings indicative of a bomb. A very, very powerful bomb. It seemed to be the equivalent of several Shiva nukes clustered together, all in lithium triteride casings. It looked like it was meant to be more than just a regular cluster bombâ€|

Ben went to work. His Mjolnir stealth armor gave him just enough strength to move the small protruding cylinders into position. 49 seconds had passed by the time he got to the last two on top of the aircraft. Ben forced one of the engines into a 45-degree angle from the Titanium â€" A which plated the dropship. To his pleasant surprise, the final engine could still be accessed via the Pelican's onboard computer. He sent the subroutine to slow the dropship to the pilot, and then released his suit's magnetic grip on the metal aircraft.

It was actually relieving to be in freefall. Ben spread his arms and legs to slow his descent and keep himself from spinning. He increased his armor's hydrostatic gel pressure to dangerous levels. All the Spartans had been taught to do that in case of an unprotected drop.

Just before Ben hit the ground, he heard an ear shattering sound above him. He looked up, and saw a blur of blue ions, clustered together, tear the clouds asunder and boil away atmosphere as it went over the horizon. The screaming sound renewed, and another bolt of plasma thundered through the heavens. The Covenant was glassing the planet. Soon all that would be left of Reach was a lump of melted dirt â€" glass â€" floating in space. Ben was about to ask Dã©jã for

any tactical information about the UNSC forces evacuating the planet, when everything went black.

8. Chapter 7

Chapter 7

A Grunty Thirstâ€¦ For Blood!

0747 hours/ August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar)/

ERROR Location unknown. Records damaged. Later Revision Somewhere on planet Reach, Epsilon Eridani system

Ben dreamt that he was being stabbed in every square inch of his body. Waking brought no relief. As he felt himself being brought back to consciousness by a failsafe program in his implant, his senses returned one by one, each one bringing a new and painful sensation. Static and noise rushed through the corridors of his mind as his implant attempted to focus his mind and lessen the distracting effects of the pain. But that didn't happen. He probably had a concussion that prevented the synchronizing of his implant between the right and left hemispheres of his brain. Ben commanded it to cease all unnecessary function. The tingling in his head lessened.

Ben gathered his thoughts. He had to find a way to rendezvous with the rest of the Spartan â€" IIIs. He had to find a way off-planet with his team. He had to take an assessment of his physical and neurological healthâ€¦ DÃ©jÃ ! He endured the confusion and pain of the activation and diagnostic of his neural implant. None of the memory was damaged or corrupted. But she wouldn't be of any help, because he wouldn't be able to sustain her activation in his current state. Well, that was good news. He checked the status of his Mjolnir armor. The shield generators wouldn't hold much of a charge, the strength and speed enhancers were at less than one-third power, and his angular black helmet was cracked, rendering the HUD nearly useless.

Ben's armor's communicator was still functional. He attempted to contact the rest of his team. He didn't receive a response, but when he checked the connection status, it showed that his signal was being picked up. They could hear him, but either he couldn't hear them, or they weren't responding. He hoped it was only a problem on his end. He sent a message to all of his team, telling them to stay put if they were injured, and to attempt to organize a rendezvous point between those with fully operational comm. units.

Ben struck out in the direction he supposed where his team had landed. As he half-ran half-jogged, Ben could hear, see, and feel, the plasma bolts screeching through the troposphere above him. The sky glowed purple-blue, and the air was fully 13 degrees warmer than it was before the bombardment began, not more than 20 minutes ago. Ben's Mjolnir suit's radiation monitor blinked a light yellow color. Not too much for his armor to block, but deadly under prolonged exposure.

When he arrived at the edge of the forest to which his team had fallen, Ben's armor was nearly shot. It had all but stopped pulling

its own weight, and the shields were totally down. He prayed that he wouldn't run into any remaining Covenant forces.

As he made his way through the trees, Ben was able to triangulate the locations where his radio signals were being picked up. Before he could get to within 100 meters of his target, his motion tracker lit up red on its border. It judged the distance to be 32 meters away. The Spartan " IIIs' motion trackers had been upgraded from the original Mjolnir design. They had slightly over twice the range, and could determine the shape of an object within 20 meters. However, their shields had only half the strength of the Spartan " IIs. It was truly evidence of the fact that the new generation of Spartans was designed for stealth, not the front lines. Ben peered through the thick underbrush and saw the green glow of plasma pistols. A troop of Grunts. It had to be. He could also hear and see a light reconnaissance vehicle, a "Ghost" as the marines called it (because of the light, ethereal droning sound it made), floating behind them. That would mean an Elite, and Ben was in no condition to handle that kind of foe. But he decided that the promise of such a fast land vehicle was too much for him to pass up.

As Ben moved quickly and quietly to intercept the Covenant forces, he wondered why they hadn't bugged out before the planet was glassed. But then again, the Covenant had little regard for its ground forces. This group was probably trying to get to somewhere where they could contact a dropship. Ben got behind a tree and made himself as small as possible. The enemy forces were headed directly for him. The Grunts were in standard traveling/patrolling formation. Two, side-by-side, weapons drawn, lead the front, while the rest walked in what passed for a line behind each leader. Any vehicles always followed foot troops, so the Ghost went behind the rest, while two more Grunts followed it, acting as rear guards. But there was something unusual about this group: The driver of the Ghost was a Grunt. Ben had never seen that in the training vids. He had thought that only Elites could operate Covenant vehicles. But this one was driven by a Grunt in dark orange armor. He supposed that the privilege to ride vehicles must default to the highest-ranking officer present, and Grunts were never seen with a Ghost without an Elite driver. But Grunts could drive interesting. Maybe he didn't give Grunts enough credit. He stayed down close to the ground, holding perfectly still, until the first pair of Grunts walked by. Ben jumped up and grabbed the Grunt closest to him by the head in the same movement. He jerked it sharply to the right, and pulled its plasma pistol from its hand.

Kamsig was the senior Grunt in his unit, and it had its benefits. He got whatever he wanted from the other Unggoy. But it had its drawbacks as well. Being the only Grunt important enough for the Elites to remember his name, Kamsig was the one first called on for menial tasks.

Kamsig's unit had been dispatched to disable the generators that the barbaric humans used to power their orbital slingshots. When they first arrived, they faced very little true resistance. They had lost a few Grunts and Jackals in a larger battle. But, over all, they were entirely victorious. Occasionally, the semi-sentient humans would kill one of the Covenant troops, but not until 5 of the humans had been killed. As the glorious Prophets said: "It is the human's custom to drown us in their own blood."

However, little by little, the human's tactic seemed to be working. First one of the Elites fell. Then another. Finally, all but Kamsig, a few other grunts, and the commanding Elite in his Ghost were left alive. Then, as they were retreating for the scouring of this planet, three loud bangs, three vapor trails, and their commander lolled to one side in his Ghost. Kamsig was able to keep some of the Grunts under control and organize them. He got into his commander's "vacant" Ghost, and used the vehicle to round up as many Grunts as possible. But in the chaos, they had been separated from the rest of the retreating Covenant. Now he was trying to keep it together and make it to an extraction point. The surface of the planet was getting far too warm for his comfort.

Kamsig and his Grunts had come across some injured lesser Demons. The Demons killed four of his men, but Kamsig dispatched one back to Oblivion with 20 rounds from his needler, a weapon that shot pink shards of crystal, which would home in on a target and then detonate after finding their target. Eight rounds were equal to a plasma grenade. With one Demon down, the rest fell from the renewed courage of the Grunts. Things were quiet while they traveled on through the forest. Suddenly, a figure with amazing speed seemingly leapt up through the ground and killed one of the front guards. The shadow took Renzar's plasma pistol and shot the other guard at point-blank range. The pair of Grunts behind the first one didn't have time to draw their weapons before the figure shot one and knocked the other one's head back at an irregular angle. Kamsig accessed the weapon controls on his Ghost. The rest in the lines (2 rows, 7 columns not counting the two that had been eliminated) had come to a stop and were drawing weapons and preparing to fire. The dark figure surveyed the situation for a fraction of a second, and then looked directly at Kamsig. Kamsig opened fire, but his target had lifted a Grunt up as a living shield. The Demon dodged to its right, and then rolled straight towards the Ghost.

Ben guessed that if he could kill the leader, the rest of the Grunts would become less of a threat. He dodged its fire, and got so close that the plasma turrets couldn't hit him. Ben jumped on top of the Ghost and grabbed its driver's head. He flung the Grunt 15 meters and into a tree, and then got into the seat of the vehicle. Ghosts had been captured before, and Ben was trained to operate one. He hit the accelerator along with a boost, and then slowed and turned around. He had killed 3 of the Grunts that hadn't ducked or gotten out of the way. Now he was facing in the direction of the rest of the Covenant troops. He activated the weapons and sprayed blue fire towards his enemies. The Grunts were in too much of a panic to defend themselves. They fell in twos and threes until none were left standing.

Kamsig blinked twice, then opened his eyes. He wished he hadn't. His dead comrades lay strewn around him. He must have been knocked unconscious in the battle. He felt a searing pain in his leg. A plasma bolt had burned away the skin, and cauterized the wound at the same time. Kamsig thought that he could hear the faint warble of a Ghost in the distance. It was a Demon. No, the Demon. The one whom he would never forget. How his hatred burned against the foul creature that had murdered his teammates, some of which were his friends! He pulled himself up on one leg and picked up the plasma pistol next to him. Then he picked up a needler that was lying a foot to his left. Its current ammunition load was almost empty, and Kamsig could feel his anger at the Demon grow as he banged the weapon against a tree until a fresh batch of needles sprung into

place.

Spartan 3-49 had calculated the position of three signal receptors in the forest. He was headed for the nearest one. Ben came to a clear area, and set the Ghost to autopilot. He took off his helmet to get a breath of fresh air. A blast of hot, putrid, dry air hit him instead. He had forgotten how much the atmosphere had changed from the plasma bombardment. He put his damaged helmet back on. He hoped that any Spartans that survived the fall would survive until he found them.

Ben couldn't believe his eyes. Rachael lie dead on the ground before him. Her body was scored with plasma burns, and her leg was broken and twisted in an irregular angle. The grief Ben felt was unbridled. He would have broken down right there if he hadn't known that there were other Spartans whom he might be able to save. He had to continue his search.

Soon Ben came upon another body. It was Kenneth. He had suffered the same fate as Rachael. But Ben still held hope that the third source would be a living Spartan.

Ben slowed his Ghost to a stop. The temperature readings in his suit said that it was 79 degrees Celsius. He walked toward his last target. The radiation readings were at critical levels. He couldn't stay here much longer. In the distance, Ben saw a form lying on the ground. He ran toward it. It was Wang-mu. And she had a pulse! Her suit was completely intact from the fall, and it had been that fact that had kept her from dying in the radiation and heat. But Wang-mu herself had sustained injuries that brought her to near death. Ben picked her up, and carried her with him back to the Ghost.

Ghosts weren't meant to carry more than one person, so it was no easy task for Ben to fit himself and Wang-mu into it. As he sped towards the nearest military shuttle launch platform, he felt the heat rise. The plasma bombardment had slowed, and then almost stopped, but the heat and radiation still rose. He soon found out why: A large crater of melted dirt lay less than a mile to the north. Not in his path, but close enough to warrant a slight detour. That crater would be what happened to the other Spartans from his Pelican.

9. Chapter 8

Chapter 8

The Great Escape

1013 hours/ August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar)/

"Glass Plains", planet Reach, Epsilon Eridani system

Ben checked Wang-mu's vital signs for the umpteenth time, and found that they were steadily failing. He estimated she had about 7 hours before she would go into cardiac arrest, if she didn't get treatment. If he could get to a launch platform, and get a ship, he would have access to a medical bay, not to mention a means of escape. He wasn't looking for any ship with a Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engine. He was looking for a specific ship: The Raven. It was a new stealth ship, developed by ONI section III and section IV. Section IV gathered

intel and technology, and section III was the NavSpecWep program. The Raven was a new breed of ships: Stealth ships. It was of moderate size: Slightly bigger than a civilian yacht, nowhere near the size of a military destroyer. All in all, it certainly was not designed for combat, but rather for closing the distance to an enemy ship's hull, and then inserting a detachment of foot soldiers to finish the job from inside.

The reason that the Humans were so easily defeated by the Covenant, is because they had inferior technology, and smaller, weaker ships. But Humanity regularly won in ground situations. If they could use stealth to turn ship-to-ship combat into a form of ground combat, then they might gain the upper hand, as well as a few technologically superior ships in the process.

The Raven was made to be virtually undetectable. It was shaped like a cone at the front: The cockpit. Then angles formed along four lines, making it square at the back: The engines. This pointed-wedge design prevented any wasted space, and allowed for pinpoint maneuvers. It also used one of section IV's proudest steals: Active Camouflage. The scientists at ONI called it "Active" Camouflage because rather than simply looking like its surroundings, it actively changed its appearance to cause a nearly impossible-to-detect cover. Because it bent the light around the user, it also bent the radioactive wavelengths that advanced motion detection systems used.

All of this made The Raven a force to be reckoned with -- especially if you were trying to escape a doomed planet surrounded by over 100 alien ships that were currently trying to exterminate your race.

Ben checked Wang-mu's vital signs once more. Her systolic blood pressure was holding at 73, her diastolic at 56, and her heart was beating 53 times per minute. Her implant was probably doing most of the work to keep her vitals going. In actuality, she was most likely in worse shape than she seemed.

Ben was relieved to see that ONI's launch platform was still intact. As he got closer, he could see 3 ships docked and ready to launch. He hoped that one of them was The Raven. Ben activated his implant and felt the dizzying effect of the lack of synchronization because of his concussion. He accessed Wang-mu's implant and checked her vital signs. Her implant had induced a coma, in order to stabilize her breathing and heart rate. He had to hurry; a prolonged coma could cause severe brain damage. When Ben came to the platform, he eased the Ghost up the ramp to the ship dock.

Most large UNSC ships were too heavy and non-aerodynamic to be flown within an atmosphere. So they had to be built in large shipyards in space. Or portions of them would be constructed on a planet, and then taken into space to be finally assembled. But some ships, like the Pelican dropship or the Albatross transport, were designed to fly in both space and atmosphere.

The ships that were designed to fly in and out of a planet's atmosphere usually used much less fuel than some of the older ships that Humanity used, because they didn't try to reach escape velocity straight up, but flew out of the planet's gravity well at an angle. Then the planet's gravity could be used to gain velocity. So, even

600 years after the invention of flight, runways were still necessary.

Ben looked at the ships that were ready for flight. The Marksman, a small C-709 Longsword Interceptor fighter, A Thought Provoked, a military shuttle, and Perchance To Dream, a ship-to-planet transport. Damn it! The Raven was nowhere to be found. He was about to settle for The Marksman when he saw the faint outline of a ship against the ground about 28 meters away. Ben used his implant to interface with Wang-mu's armor. He scanned the area for UNSC ship friend-or-foe id tags. Four showed up. He sent his ONI authority code: a signal to the general area that causes any and all ONI equipment to allow his command. Four display sheets appeared in his vision. He accessed The Raven's control panel and deactivated its camouflage. A large matte black ship appeared. He extended its cargo bay ramp and got in the Ghost. He drove it and Wang-mu into the back of the stealth ship, and closed the bay doors.

10. Chapter 9

Chapter 9

Doctor, Doctor

1348 hours/ August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar)

UNSC Ship The Raven, ONI launch platform, planet Reach, Epsilon Eridani system

Ben resisted the urge to tend to Wang-mu's injuries immediately. But he knew that he couldn't do that right now. If he didn't get off of Reach they would both die. Ben accessed The Raven's flight control systems. This would be a bumpy ride.

Ben knew that the Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engine, or slipspace drive, on the ship couldn't be used inside of a planet's gravity well. He'd have to get around the Covenant and then get far enough away from Reach if he wanted a chance to escape. And even if he did that, there was still a chance that the Covenant's faster ships would follow him.

The Raven shot down the 250-meter launch strip at 850 kilometers per hour. But if someone else were there, they wouldn't have known. The Active Camouflage truly did live up to all expectations. Soon Ben was in Reach's upper atmosphere. As soon as he cleared the stratosphere, he could see the force that was bombarding Humanity's military headquarters. He plotted a departure vector that was farthest from any Covenant ships, but it took him directly through a debris field from a decimated Covenant destroyer. Ben would have to pilot The Raven on his own, because the ship didn't come with an on-board AI to handle pinpoint space maneuvers, and his concussion prevented any help from Dã©jã .

Ben could hear each ping against the side of his ship as small chunks of metal ricocheted off of its hull. The Raven's pointed design helped to prevent any serious damage, however. The problem was that wary Covenant sensors might be able to notice that the debris was suddenly parting in a certain area.

To his luck, Ben managed to make it out of range of the Covenant ships without being detected. But in order not to be spotted when he went into slipspace, Ben had to be at the edge of the Epsilon Eridani system. So for now he set the ship to autopilot so he could tend to Wang-mu. He carried her to the medical bay and set her on one of the diagnosis trays.

The Spartan " IIIs were trained in field medical application, and had received a cursory training in more in depth medical situations. However, this was mainly used to augment their studies in biology. But Ben had always taken an interest in medicine, and had studied it extra-curricularly. He had a particular interest in flash cloning: quick-growing clones of vital organs, including brains and even people. But it hadn't been perfected, and most attempts to clone Humans had failed: the subjects dying from mental and physical ailments within months.

The computer came back with Wang-mu's diagnosis. Both of her legs were broken, and her right arm was completely shattered: broken in 23 places. She was bleeding internally, and one of her broken ribs had penetrated her right lung. She had some slight damage to her spinal cord, and slight radiation poisoning. Her heart was barely beating now: 23 beats per minute, and her liver was about to fail. Without it, her blood would cool. Ben couldn't think of what to do. He put her on life support. That would keep her heart beating, and keep her left lung breathing. Ben thought of using _The Raven_'s flash clone chamber to clone her a lung and a liver, but in order to transplant them into her body he would have to take her out of her coma, and that would kill her. And no matter what he did, short of cloning her a new brain and spinal cord, she would still have radiation poisoning, and would most likely be a vegetable. And that would never work. Even if the clone lived, he couldn't just remove her original brain she was going to die of course! Ben had the answer! Why hadn't he thought of it before!

11. Chapter 10

Chapter 10

Inventory

1312 hours/ August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar)

"Glass Plains", planet Reach, Epsilon Eridani system

Kamsig felt like he was about to collapse. He had been limping across the planet of the Holy Light for more than three units, and he had no protection from the heat or radiation. His rebreather was running low on coolant, and the methane was getting stale. He didn't know how much longer he could last. $\frac{1}{4}$ unit ago he had started hallucinating. And he knew something was wrong with his vision: the air on the horizon looked like it was shimmering.

Kamsig couldn't think of a possible future in which he survived. He fell to the ground, closed his eyes, and imagined being on his home planet: oceans of liquid methane, "Swamp Lights" which were naturally occurring pillars of fire that would blaze off of the atmosphere all year round, glaciers made of frozen water that moved freely around his frozen planet, and urban swamps towards the equator. But this

pristine vision was not reality. In reality, the oceans were being used as burnable fuel for huge production facilities. In reality, the beautiful Swamp Lights had been deemed "dangerous" and had been extinguished. In reality, the glaciers were being melted by the rising temperature and were polluting the oceans. In reality, the beautiful cities that lay in the equatorial swamps were being overrun with manufacturing plants. And reality was the Unggoy membership in the Covenant. Now, the Covenant also gave them technology and protection, but many were starting to believe that simpler times were better than technology, and no one was quite sure why they needed protection. But in his last moments, Kamsig wanted to see his planet the way it was remembered by his people, the way it was pictured in drawings, the way his people longed for it to be once again.

Ben had thought of the only thing that could save Wang-mu. And the process had been done before. He was dreading the tasks that he would have to perform, but it was the only way.

The Raven, while being a ship in a class designed for covert troop insertion, also had another purpose: cargo transport. It was the best ship that the Human forces had for getting supplies to their forces around Covenant blockades.

Ben remembered seeing the equipment he would need in the cargo roster. As he opened the cases of tools that he would need, he made sure everything was there: carbon lacing, electron neuro-filaments, crystalline memory cubes, cell-mapping nanoprobeſ just what the doctor ordered, so to speak. He set to work carrying it to the medical bay and assembling it in the manner necessary.

Ben had set up 3 cloning tanks. Two were standard med bay ordinance, one he patched together from scratch. These tanks were more complicated than normal flash cloning chambers, in that they could clone more complicated cells and tissue than normal. However, more complicated subjects led to errors in DNA/RNA copying 9 out of 10 times, leading to disability, cancerous tissue, and neurological problems.

Ben couldn't clone Wang-mu a new brain and transplant it into her body, but he could transplant it into a new vessel. The clone chambers on The Raven were not sophisticated enough to clone an entire Human, but they could clone enough for his plan.

Kamsig thought he could hear the low droning of one of the amphibious creatures that inhabited his homeworld. As his mind lurched back to consciousness, Kamsig realized that the sound he heard wasn't from his planet. In fact, he wasn't on his planet. He opened his eyes and wished he hadn't. The light was blinding, and his head hurt even more. He tried to pick himself up off of the ground, but his left leg gave out beneath him. Instead, he lay on his back, and squinted at the dark shape coming towards him.

Ben finished taking a complete neurological scan of Wang-mu's brain, and then extracted a DNA sample.

As the silhouette came into focus, Kamsig couldn't believe his eyes. It was a Phantom dropship! Kamsig sent a charged bolt of plasma flying through the air above him. As the ship descended to pick him up through the grav-lift, he felt himself slipping out of consciousness.

Ben had finished his gruesome task. The flash cloning chambers were busy cloning Wang-mu's brain, and soon the electron neuro-filaments would be sending electric bursts down her neural pathways, and then the nano-reassemblers would create a perfect replica: a smart AI.

12. Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Doctor, Doctor, Part 2

0039 hours/ August 31, 2552 (Military Calendar)/

UNSC Stealth ship _The Raven_, Near Eridanus 6, Epsilon Eridani system

Ben stumbled, exhausted, to the medical deck on the stealth ship from the temporary setup in the cargo bay. There just wasn't space in the medical bay for the equipment that he had set up. But his mind was on other things. It had been less than 24 hours since this all began, but he had been to Hell and back. Well, not quite back yet. As far as he knew, he had lost every single one of his teammates, except for Wang-mu, in a sense. Reach had fallen, and most, if not all, of the Spartan IIs, his role models, were dead. He had noticed that the glassing procedure was going very slowly, however, and some areas were completely ignored. Maybe somebody down there would find his or her own way out. As it was, the ships patrolling the skies of Reach would blast down anything that wasn't their own.

Ben had managed to salvage some pieces of equipment from Wang-mu's now-useless armor, and had put it in the machine shop. He'd get to that later. Right now, he had a splitting headache, and a ringing in his ears that was driving him insane.

"Medical bay, open," Ben said as he came to the semi-clear medical bay doors. They parted in front of him, and he walked inside. He took a stimulant, and pulled together enough focus to upload some of Dã©jã 's subalgorithms into _The Raven_'s systems.

The Raven had a surprisingly sophisticated array of medical equipment, being designed to ferry senior brass. Ben sat on one of the exam tables, peeled off the outer radiation-shielding layers of his armor, and lay down.

"Dã©jã , begin a scan on exam table 1."

"Scanningâ€|" Two halves of a semi-cylinder slowly began rising on either side of him. They met directly above him, entombing Ben in a cylindrical case full of dancing blue lights.

After several moments, Dã©jã said, "Scan complete. Retracting scanning bay. I am displaying the results on the bedside monitor."

"Thank you, Dã©jã ." Ben examined the results. Quite a few fractions and contusions, several broken ribs, and a broken tibia. He had some slight internal bleeding in his abdomen, and his right kidney had

taken a tremendous beating. Not to mention a throbbing concussion. He programmed the small flash clone tanks (which were standard in only a few ships) with his DNA and set them to clone a kidney. Satisfied that everything was running itself, Ben said,

"DÃ©jÃ , prep the automatic operating bay. I need some bleeding stopped, and several bones set."

"Understood. I'll have it ready in 3 minutes, Ben."

13. Section II, Chapter 1

Section 2

Development

Chapter 1

"Wow, a mark V!"

0621 hours/ August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar)/

Outer shell of Reach Station Gamma, orbiting planet Reach, Epsilon Eridani system

Hundreds of Covenant troops in vacuum suits swarmed over the surface of the station, and the dull thumps from the landing pods could be felt every few seconds. James, Spartan II â€" 132, looked at the angry aliens that were bearing down on him and his teammates, John and Linda.

The three Spartan â€" IIs were on a mission to prevent the Covenant from capturing a navigational database that hadn't been purged via the Cole Protocol. A man named Admiral Cole, shortly after his first conflict with the Covenant, created the Cole Protocol. He knew that Earth's greatest defense in this war was that the Covenant didn't yet know its location.

The Cole Protocol stated that any ships about to be captured had to purge their entire navigational database, and weren't allowed to make direct slipstream jumps to Earth, having to make several random jumps first to throw off the Covenant. The Cole Protocol was generally activated within the UNSC without hesitation; failure to do so was treason. But one of the ships docked at Reach Station Gamma was disconnected from the main system, and its database couldn't be purged. So three Spartans had flown a Pelican, originally meant to board a Covenant ship, into the outer shell of the locked-down station. Seconds after they landed, several enemy frigates came out of a precise slipspace jump right next to the station, dropped a payload of troops, and shot down the Pelican.

James worked to free the explosives from the prow of the Pelican, now sticking out of the surface of the station from the crash. James was still very dexterous, even through the bulky armor and layer of shielding. His right arm had been burned off at the elbow years ago. Despite that, James could still move the armor, which would normally cover his hand and forearm, with his mind. He had heard that the Spartan III's armor had an even more complicated neural interface.

"Back into the Pelican!" John, Spartan II "117", shouted. "Just a little bit longer", James thought, "and I can salvage these explosives". He worked furiously to remove the charges that were attached to the nose of the dropship, and had been designed to blow into the hull of a Covenant ship. But it was looking like that wasn't going to be an option.

Plasma bolts fired from the weapons of eager Jackals in vacuum suits streaked by. "Almost there!" James thought. Just then, one of the field commander "Elite" types fired rounds from a more accurate weapon: a needler, whose rounds would home in on a living target. Five of the crystalline shards bounced off of James' shields, and he got the explosives free. He was jumping to the surface of the station when one of the needles pierced his shield and lodged in his vacuum thruster pack.

James knew he had made a mistake to stay and try to free the charges, but if he didn't, a stray shot may have detonated them, killing his teammates as well as himself. But he had completed his job; the explosives were out of harm's way. This all passed through James' mind in a split second, along with the realization that he wouldn't have anything to save him when the needle detonated, as was the true danger of the weapon. A purple-orange flash, and James' pack exploded, sending him flying into space. He felt a pain shoot into his back. He tried to adjust; he tried anything to slow his ascension from the station.

"I can't slow it down! I'm spinning out of control!" He cried into his mic, in a futile last ditch effort.

Ben lay on the operating table. The computer's medical knowledge database, coupled with the skill of a class II AI such as Dã©jã , would be a sufficient surgeon.

Dã©jã checked "The Raven"'s flight path and status. It was running dark, at a crawl near Reach Station Gamma. The Active Camo protected its form from sensors, but its energy signature had to remain below that of the average radiation coming from the wreckage around Reach. Then she checked the cloning process for Wang-mu. Then she directed the surgical arm in the medical bay toward Ben's ribs. Then she checked all of the sensor readouts, and tracked the movements of the nearest Covenant ships. All of this took one processing cycle. Then another. Another. Then she noticed an anomaly in the comm. receiver. For precisely .00231648 of one second, a friend-or-foe tag flicked UNSC. But it was probably just a damaged marine tag that managed to survive a ship's explosion. Dã©jã would ignore it.

14. Section II, Chapter 2

Chapter 2

The Calm Before

12 ½ greater sub-units/ Ninth Age of Reclamation (Prophetic Calendar)/

CCS "Unrivaled Brightness", near planet Reach, Epsilon Eridani system

Kamsig awoke lying on a bed. He sat up and looked around. When he saw the purple opalescent walls, and noticed that he was not wearing a methane rebreather, he knew that he must be in the Unggoy section of a Covenant ship. Noticing a panel next to his bed that had started a soft beeping sound, Kamsig guessed he was in the medical section.

A rather attractive-looking female who was tending to another patient several beds away noticed that the monitor panel next to Kamsig was calling for her attention. Slightly embarrassed, Kamsig lay back down, pretending to sleep. The nurse walked over and tapped three buttons on the display. Kamsig decided to pretend to wake up.

"Ah. I see the monitor was correct in telling me that you were awake," the nurse said with a hint of a smile.

Kamsig realized his mistake: "Ohâ€¦ yesâ€¦ umâ€¦. I was, butâ€¦ I was just resting."

"I see," she said with a growing smile.

Kamsig thought she looked familiar. She seemed like she knew him as wellâ€¦ He couldn't remember. Maybe it would come to him later.

"Well, you just go back to sleep," she said with a smile and turned to leave.

"Wait," Kamsig said, "what ship are we on?"

"_Unrivaled Brightness_."

"What happened? How did I get here?"

"They told me they were looking for something on the ground of the Planet of the Holy Light when they came across you. You had some pretty serious injuries, and you've been asleep for the past 30 lesser sub-units. But you should be back to normal in a few standard sub-units."

"Uhâ€¦ Oh, ok," Kamsig had become lost in thought and had stopped listening for a second. "Thanks," he said.

2 ½ sub-units had passed, and Kamsig remembered from where he knew his nurse. Her name was Trishan, and he had been in the medical bay on the _Unrivaled Brightness_ before. About 3 greater units ago, Kamsig was wounded in the arm by a piece of shrapnel (why the humans used such primitive weapons, Kamsig couldn't understand), and he came to this very same ship to be treated. He had struck up a friendship with her while he was there. It had obviously meant more to her than he had known. _Maybe I should get wounded more often,_ Kamsig mused. For the last couple of sub-units, he had been enjoying his stay. But, alas, all good things had to come to an end. Although he had taken some pretty serious injuries, no member of any worker-class was allowed to remain under medical attention for more than 4 sub-units.

Kamsig assumed that he would be dispatched to one of the teams on the surface of the Planet of the Holy Light. Why the Hierarchs didn't simply send all of the forces available down to the surface, do what

was necessary, and set fire to the human world, he couldn't understand.

Ben sat up. His head was still groggy from the sedatives. He used his neural implants to check the time. 0937 hours, September 1.

"Dã©jã , are we ready for a slipspace jump to Earth?"

"Yesâ€|" Dã©jã hesitated. Ben was surprised. AIs never hesitated. They always knew exactly what they wanted to say, and said it immediately. Although, some dumb AIs, after decades of work, had been known to be somewhat 'quirky' and start picking up Human mannerisms.

"Dã©jã , is something wrong?" Ben inquired.

"No. Iâ€| No, I won't bother."

"Listen, if you have something you want to say, say it. In this kind of a situation, we need all of the information we can getâ€| and we need to share it."

"You are correct, Ben," Dã©jã began, "I detected a weak UNSC transmitter signal. It could be someone still alive out thereâ€| but it would take us a lot of time, not to mention close proximity to a Covenant vessel, for us to investigate. I knew that if I told you, you would want to try to find someone. I request that you consider the risks, and the likelihood that we would find anything even if we weren't detected."

"I understand the risks. But you know that I'm not going to let any chance to save someone slip away. I also understand where you are coming from. UNSC protocol would direct us to Earth at the soonest time possible. But I can't let another life sit on my conscience."

"I understand. You've been through a lot. I've already turned the ship around. Our course will take us near Reach Station Gamma," Dã©jã said.

15. Section II, Chapter 3

Chapter 3

II + III Awsome

1700 hours/ September 1, 2552 (Military Calendar)/

Near Reach Station Gamma, Epsilon Eridani system

"Anything?"

"No. I've stopped receiving the signal."

"Well, scan again."

"I will, but you know I can't risk a full scan. The Covenant will pick it up."

"No. This might be the only way that will work. Scan for specific alloys, life signs, transmitters, everything."

"A Covenant CCS is too near. We would be detected."

Ben entertained just giving up. No! He knew that someone was out there. Maybe inside of a bulkhead welded shut, maybe in a sealed suit.

"I'm taking us deeper into the wreckage. That should scatter the scan residuals enough to confuse the Covenant for a moment. That will let us get out of here if nothing turns up," Ben said.

"Scanningâ€¦"

After a moment, the scan results began to scroll along the monitors. Then they were transmitted directly to Ben's neural implants. A few things looked interesting, but none were what Ben was looking for. The fine mist of metallic debris from melted ships scattered the scan every which way. Ben looked for something, anything that could be alive. Nothing. Wait! Nothing! That was it! Ben noticed a very small stream of nothing. Perfectly empty space. Either a piece of debris the exact size of a Human in a space suit had knocked aside the small particles of titanium dust, or a Human in a suit had attempted to make it back to a ship.

Ben traced the path. In one direction, it led back to the Station. This path had become slightly clouded with dust. In the other direction, a clear path led away from the Station. It didn't seem likely that anyone would try to move away, but that had to be the answer.

"Dã©jã , can you follow that empty streak to its source?"

"Yes. But I'll have to move extraordinarily slowly, and my sensors are picking up a Covenant ship heading this way."

"How close?"

"At its current speed, it will be here in roughly 12 minutes. Firing range in 8, although this debris might increase the proximity needed for the ship to hit us."

James knew that space was cold. But he never, even with years of combat in the most horrid of climates, imagined that anything could be this cold. It had been more than a day since the accident. His suit had stopped functioning after just 5 hours. He had manually activated the air reserves, but they were only designed to last 10 hours. He had gone roughly the last 12 hours without any fresh air. Apparently, his Spartan II augmentations had increased his lung capacity, as well as allowing him to survive in low oxygen environments.

For the last 3 hours, James had been resigned to death. If he didn't suffocate, he would freeze. At this point, he was almost ready to give in and take off his helmet. It was only his years of training that prevented him from doing so. He had to wait until the end in hope that a ship might save him. But the chances for that were looking rather slim.

James closed his eyes. However, if he hadn't, he would have noticed the very small piece of debris that suddenly turned and began to grow larger.

Ben deactivated the camouflage on The Raven and turned on the view screen. There, at the end of the dispersement trail, was a slowly drifting green metallic object. He was amazed. An actual Spartan II was floating in front of the ship. Ben wasted no time.

"Dã©jã , decompress the rear loading bay and turn us around. While you are doing that, I'll put on a sealed suit. When you're done, I'll attach myself to a line reel him in."

Dã©jã didn't need to be told whom 'him' was referring to. "Done. Whenever you're ready. Also, the Covenant ship is 2 minutes away from firing range."

Ben walked through the airlock and into the empty space of the bay after donning the suit by the doorway. He pulled one of the thin metal lines from its wall alcove, and gave the word: "Dã©jã , open the doors."

Ben used the magnification of his suit's helmet in order to spot the free-floating Spartan. He positioned himself at just the right angle to leap off and recover the soldier, or, as much as he didn't want to believe it, the body. He pushed off of the ship in zero gravity, and flew away from the ship at a quick rate. The green speck in the distance grew quickly, until Ben could see it without magnification. As he approached, for a moment it appeared as though he would miss, but then Ben threw his weight to one side with all of his might. He curved slightly, and impacted directly with his objective. Ben grabbed the line with Spartan in hand, and pulled himself back to his ship.

Ben was beginning to grow tired of being a doctor. There was something about seeing this Spartan II, his predecessor, so helpless, that made Ben feel very uneasy. Upon returning to The Raven, Dã©jã had activated the camouflage and set a direct course through the wreckage and out of the system. Unfortunately, the covenant ship was still following, yet it hadn't quite made it into range. Dã©jã had immediately recognized the Spartan as James, Spartan "132", as she had been the teacher of the Spartan IIs. Ben had taken James to the medical bay, and applied life support, resuscitative measures, and administered super-oxygenated air. James would pull through. In fact, he had already begun breathing on his own by the time Ben returned to the cockpit of the ship.

"Dã©jã , where's the enemy ship in relation to us?"

"Less than 10 minutes from firing at its current rate versus ours. We are over 1 hour from being able to perform a slipspace jump."

"Then what are our other options?"

"We go in, get to the control center, and blow that Covenant ship back to hell."

Ben whirled around in his seat. Standing behind him was a seven-foot-tall, green clad figure. Dã©jã appeared on the screen

next to him with a slight smile.

"You should have told me that he had already recovered!" Ben could hardly contain his joy.

"So, what'll it be? Are we going to talk about me getting better, or are we going to make a plan and take out that ship?" James asked.

16. Section II, Chapter 4

Chapter 4

A Plan is Hatched

1721 hours/ September 1, 2552 (Military Calendar)/

Near wreckage of Reach Station Gamma, Epsilon Eridani system

"All right, first we need intelligence. Dã©jã , what do the readings on the enemy ship indicate?" Ben asked.

"Minor scoring along the starboard hull, most likely caused by Archer missile pods. Other than that, the ship is in pristine condition. Shields are at full, weapons are fully charged, and the engines are steadily catching up to us."

Ben sighed. "Activate the camouflage and take us around that large piece of debris at the last second," Ben indicated the destination by marking it on a map with his neural implants.

"Brace yourselves. I'm activating the port thrusters in 5 seconds," Dã©jã warned.

"I have an idea," Ben began, "It's been noted that whenever Covenant ship deploy their Seraph fighters, they create very small holes in their shields in order to accommodate-" _The Raven_ lurched, causing a slight hesitation, "-the fighters. I think that, in this case, the only weapon that would have any success is a boarding party. If we could get _The Raven_ so close that the Covenant ship wouldn't be able to fire for fear of hitting itself with its own shots, we might be able to force them to deploy their Seraphs, giving us our window." Ben knew it was a horribly dangerous plan. There were far too many variables, and each step took more luck than the last, not to mention the fact that it wasn't just his life on the line.

"Sorry to interrupt, but the our pursuers have continued past us. They just started to turn around," informed Dã©jã .

"Given our circumstances, you idea is the best one we have right now. My only question is, how do we get through when one of these holes opens up?" asked James.

Ben was amazed that James had even considered the crazed idea. He hadn't thought of the specifics. Then it came to him. "Dã©jã , what's the status of the Ghost I left in cargo bay 1?"

"As far as I can tell, it's still functioning."

"Good. Then we decompress the cargo bay and launch the Ghost at top speed towards the Covenant. Hopefully, with the repulsion technology on the bottom of the Ghost, we can slide across one of the Seraphs, through the gap in the shields, and into the launch bay," Ben offered.

"Then what?" inquired James.

"Well, the most possible option would be to strap any explosives in this ship's armory to the Ghost, and carry them to the engine or main control room. Not exactly the best move, but at least it seems doable. Our only other choice is to try to stow away, and make our move at some other point. But that plan has too many holes. We might not even even have a chance to get off."

"Or," Dã@jÃ began, "we could try to infiltrate their computer systems. Our intelligence shows a lack of security and development in the area of artificial intelligence. They haven't even cracked some of our most basic encryptions. I might not be able to do the job as a dumb AI, but a smart AIâ€|"

"I know what you're thinking, but initializing here too soon poses a serious threat to her memories, not to mention her lifespan," Ben said.

"Uh, you mind filling me in, here?" James asked.

"One of my fellow Spartan IIIs, Wang-mu, Spartan III-77, was horribly injured while we were still on Reach. The only way I could save her was to copy her mind and turn her into a smart AI, then flash all of her memories into her new memory network. But the process needs more time. We would have to leave Dã@jÃ in charge of The Raven, then let her fly it back to Earth with Wang-mu after you and I disable the Covenant ship," Ben explained to James.

"Ben," Dã@jÃ began softly, "I know that you are only thinking of how best to save every life possible, but in this case, you need to think of how this can serve the greater good. Can you imagine how beneficial it would be to us in this war if we captured an enemy ship? Think of the secrets we could learn, the technology that we could gain."

Ben struggled with himself for a moment.

James stepped in: "I say we go for it. I don't know how much I'm allowed to tell you, but I was on a mission yesterday morning to do just this very thing. If there's still a chance that I can complete that mission, I'll do whatever it takes. My official rank in the UNSC is that of Chief Petty Officer, and I'll use that if necessary."

"No, no," said Ben. "I understand." Renewed vigor came into him. "Dã@jÃ , initialize Wang-mu. James, meet me in cargo bay 1 and upload Dã@jÃ into your suit. Dã@jÃ , bring us around and underneath that ship. Get us as close as possible, scrape their shields if you have to, just keep us too close to fire at."

Ben stopped at the armory on his way down the corridor to cargo bay 2. He took 2 BR 55 rifles, 2 magnum, 50 caliber pistols, and 10 fragmentation grenades. He attached them to his waist, and walked to

the room where one of his Spartans was being brought back to life.

Ben walked up to the terminal that contained the memory cube, which now housed Spartan III-77. He transferred all of her memories up to the last hour-and-a-half of her former life. He activated her, and skipped most of the initialization protocol.

"Ben, all I can give you is another 3 minutes before I have to make my move. That ship is closing fast, and I can't dodge forever," warned DÃ©jÃ .

"I know, I know. I'm almost done."

Fear. That was the emotion coursing through her body. The thin air whipped around her as she gathered her courage and let go. She fell from the Pelican, the ground growing larger beneath her by the second. She braced for the impact, and then, as if a switch had been turned, there was nothing.

Hours seemed to pass, and then they seemed to stretch forever. She realized that the feeling in her limbs had gone. All she felt was cold. But she also felt an expansion. She no longer had arms or legs, but she could manipulate her environment at will. She felt vast banks of knowledge being placed in her mind. She could think of seven different things, in seven different places, at seven different times. It was amazingâ€¦ glorious! Her mind was expanding, her intelligence growing. Then, she heard a voice.

"I know, I know. I'm almost done."

She vaguely knew the voice. It seemed to stretch over an hour. Why the voice speaking so slowly? No, not slowly, she was thinking faster than the voice! She wanted to laugh, but just as quickly as the emotion came, it was replaced with sadness, fear, the need to hide. Then came anger, then joy. She wanted this flux to stop. Suddenly, it did. She was back in control of her emotions.

"I'm sorry about that, Wang-mu. I've got most of the systems normalized now. I've uploaded the ship internal recording logs, so you should be caught up. All that's left is for you to choose your avatar. Then I can download you to my neural lace."

Wang-mu knew what she wanted her appearance to be before Ben asked her to choose. She accessed the memory files on The Raven. She found several images of Spartan IIs in the database.

The image that appeared atop the holo-pedestal was stunning. The miniature figure standing in front of Ben was clad in green, pearlescent, armor. It was every piece the spitting image of Linda, a Spartan II renowned for her prowess with an S2-AM sniper rifle. Every piece of armor was in place, except for the helmet, whose absence revealed the image of Wang-mu's face. Instead of the regulation-shorn hair, her hair was slightly lower than shoulder-length, and pulled back into a ponytail. Her skin, rather than the pale white that was trademark for most Spartans, glowed with a faint white-blue light. Her eyes, instead of the brown that they had been, were now bright blue. Ben paused.

"Well?"

"Beautiful" I mean, good choice. Let's go." Ben uploaded Wang-mu into his neural implants. He felt the rush of cold consciousness flow into his mind, a sensation he had only felt once before when his ability to interface with a smart AI had first been tested.

As Spartan III-49 entered the main corridor with his new companion, he turned and stopped at the machine shop. He took his suit, most of which had been repaired by the automatic repair mechanisms, and replaced any damaged components with their undamaged counterparts that he had salvaged from Spartan III-77's armor. He donned his gear as he ran down the hallway to rendezvous with Dã©jã and James.

When Ben arrived at his destination, Dã©jã said over the intercom: "I've been evading the Covenant ship. I'm taking us into close quarters as we speak. I estimate our window of entry will be open in less than one minute. Good timing."

"And here I was afraid that I'd have to destroy the Covenant menace all on my own," James said with a smirk. Though there was no physical relation, he felt like an older brother to the Spartan IIIs.

"Alright. They're opening the bay doors and letting the Seraph fighters out. There's nothing more I can do to pilot this ship." Here, James placed his hand on the terminal at the wall and uploaded Dã©jã into his Mjolnir armor. For any Spartan, having an AI onboard meant greatly increased speed and reflexes.

Ben grabbed on to the back of the ghost as the cargo bay depressurized. The doors slid open, and they saw how close this really would be.

End
file.